

NTSB Blames Fatigue for Train Collision

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WASHINGTON - The crew of a Union Pacific freight train probably was asleep when it collided with another train in Texas two years ago, releasing a plume of chlorine gas that killed three people, the National Transportation Safety Board reported Thursday.

Thirty people were injured in the June 28, 2004, wreck near San Antonio when the Union Pacific train plowed into a Burlington Northern Santa Fe train as it moved onto a rail siding.

Gerald Weeks, chief of human performance at the NTSB, said both the engineer and the conductor had worked grueling work schedules in the days before the collision in Macdonia, Texas, and had not gotten adequate rest.

Weeks noted that the conductor had asked the engineer "what happened" in the moments after the accident. Weeks also noted that the engineer had sped up the train as he passed through signals directing him to slow down and to stop.

Weeks presented those details of the wreck's aftermath in support of the NTSB staff's conclusion that the two men were probably asleep at the time of the accident.

The NTSB staff's findings were in a draft report of its findings to the board, which was considering whether to accept the conclusions.

The conductor later died from inhaling chlorine gas that was released when one of the tank cars on the train was punctured in the crash. Two residents in a home near the accident also died from inhaling chlorine.

Early in the probe of the accident, safety investigators said they were perplexed by the Union Pacific train's movements leading up to the collision. They found that the locomotive had slowed at a point where it didn't have to, then the throttle moved for no clear reason and the train apparently accelerated through yellow lights and blasted right through a red stop signal at 45 mph.

In a coma for 10 days, the Union Pacific engineer, Arturo Cadena, says he remembers little of the accident.

At an NTSB hearing last year in Washington, Cadena said the uncertainty of his start times made it hard to plan

rest. "You never know if it's your turn or not," Cadena said. "If you say 'no,' they'll call you back, so rather than being awakened all night I'll go."

On the Friday before the accident, Cadena started work at 5:50 a.m. and was released from duty at 4:15 p.m. He started again that night at 2 a.m. and finished at 3:30 p.m. on Saturday. Eight hours later he was back at work, finishing up at 12:30 p.m. on Sunday, only to return at 2:45 a.m. the morning of the accident.

Cadena was legally rested, according to Federal Railroad Administration testimony.

Weeks said the staff investigation had found that the conductor also had a grueling work schedule the previous week. The investigation showed that he had been off duty for 26 hours before showing up for work. The investigation found that the conductor had been drinking before the accident.

Union Pacific and the FRA say the railroad has improved its safety practices since the accident.